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ABSTRACT

In the U.S. work force, job mobility has become the standard employment pattern. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 10% of the work force switches jobs every year. Among the factors contributing to the career mobility of today's workers are the following: search for competitive employment positions; pursuit of a good career match; desire for career advancement; and search for personal satisfaction. Whether career mobility is initiated by the employer because the tasks, skills, or characteristics of given workers are no longer needed or by workers because they are dissatisfied with some aspect of their jobs or organizations, connecting with new employment can be unsettling. The following are some ways workers can use career mobility to capitalize on opportunities in the workplace: have a positive attitude; develop new skills and competencies; engage in career exploration; be willing to compromise; seek career counseling; and be creative. Career mobility is a trend that is likely to continue as workers assume more responsibility for their career development and advancement. (Contains 14 references.) (MN)

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DIGEST NO. 191

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Bettina Lankard Brown

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Career Mobility: A Choice or Necessity?

What is triggering the industrial, occupational, and geographical mobility of today's workers? Some believe it is a response to downsizing and restructuring. Others believe it reflects a pursuit for job advancement and a better quality of life. This *Digest* examines the factors triggering workers' career mobility and suggests ways workers can use career mobility to capitalize on the dynamics of a changing workplace.

Factors Contributing to Career Mobility

Job mobility in the U.S. work force has become the standard employment pattern in today's workplace. Between 1991 and 1996, the median job tenure for men 25-64 years of age fell by an average of approximately 19 percent, with older workers most affected: males 55-64 years of age had a 29 percent drop in tenure and males 45-54 years of age, a 25 percent drop (Koretz 1997). Although the job tenure of females remained somewhat constant during this period, this may reflect the increased numbers of women who have entered the work force during these same years rather than stable job tenure patterns. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 10 percent of the work force switches jobs every year (Henkoff 1996). The following are some of the factors contributing to the career mobility of today's workers.

Search for Competitive Employment Positions

Organizational downsizing, outsourcing, and restructuring have eliminated many positions of midlevel management (Appelbaum and Santiago 1997). The typical mid-management workers in transition are 45-58 years old with over 20 years of job tenure (Unger 1995). Many older workers nearing retirement age are also in transition as organizations increasingly offer them incentives to leave their jobs early. For the most part, these workers are not without skills, nor are they the victims of age discrimination. It is just that the skills they have and/or their job functions no longer fit their organizations; they are outdated. Workers whose skills or motivations no longer fit the organization are being eliminated. "Over the past two decades, Fortune 500 companies have laid off millions of workers to re-engineer organizational functions" (Borchard 1995, p. 9). Knowing these facts, many workers who want to retain a competitive position in the work force are moving to acquire new skills that will enable them to fulfill new roles. They are taking risks (some imposed and some elected) to tackle the unfamiliar and develop the skills they need to assume new and challenging positions in the workplace.

Pursuit of a Good Career Match

Young workers typically demonstrate their quest for a good career match by frequent job moves. According to Feller (1996), "as many as 50% to 60% of all new hires leave their jobs within the first seven months" (p. 95). Some job churning may be due to limited knowledge of job requirements and unrealistic job expectations. For more experienced workers, the job hop may reflect an attempt to step up the career ladder. A person may have one or two short-term jobs, but when that employment pattern is extensive, it can have a negative influence on an employer's decision to hire. Therefore, job hopping in search of a satisfying career should not become a way of life. Because it is costly to hire and train new workers, some employers believe that a worker must remain with a company for at least 4 years to enable the company to recover hiring costs alone (Blyth 1996).

Desire for Career Advancement

Some workers leave their jobs because they perceive this is the only way to advance. In organizations characterized by downsizing and restructuring, there are fewer opportunities for people to move up the traditional career ladder. Many midlevel management positions have been eliminated, causing the number of qualified candidates to exceed the number of job opportunities. In addition, innovations such as precision manufacturing and networked computer terminals are enabling companies to realize increased levels of productivity with fewer workers. As companies outsource functions previously performed in house, they also eliminate internal opportunities (Kaye 1996). For workers who have high career aspirations, these conditions trigger career movement.

"The Glass Ceiling" phenomenon has prompted many female managers to leave their organizations because of the lack of advancement opportunities. A recent study by the U.S. Department of Labor corroborates the lack of equal opportunity for top-level positions of the organization. "At the highest levels of corporations, the promise of reward for preparation and pursuit of excellence is not equally available to members of all groups" (Stroh 1996, p. 102).

Search for Personal Satisfaction

Boredom, mismatched values, and conflicts with other life roles can create personal unrest and trigger job movement—upward, downward, lateral, and outward. Job dissatisfaction occurs for any number of reasons. Boredom often occurs when people plateau in their jobs—when their skills and the direction of the organization become stagnant (Kaye 1996). People who are involved in work that lacks personal meaning and value also experience job dissatisfaction, a major reason for initiating job transition. Another reason individuals plan transition from one job to another is because their current jobs are in conflict with other priorities, e.g., marriage, children, parents, and outside interests—all of which take time and effort. In a poll commissioned by the Merck Family (Ehrenreich 1995), 72 percent of the male respondents and 87 percent of the female respondents stated that they want more time to spend with their children. Twenty-eight percent said they voluntarily took a pay cut in the last year to make such changes in their lives. Sales of such books as *Your Money or Your Life* (Dominguez and Robin 1992) are another indication of the changing values and priorities of many workers that precipitate career mobility (Griffin 1995).

Ways to Capitalize on Career Mobility

Whether career mobility is initiated by the employer because the tasks, skills, or characteristics of given workers are no longer needed or by workers because they are dissatisfied with some aspect of their jobs or organizations, connecting with new employment can be unsettling. It requires change and change demands flexibility and compromise. Following are some ways workers can use career mobility to capitalize on opportunities in the workplace.

Have a Positive Attitude

Looking at future opportunities with enthusiasm and as a chance to tackle new challenges can enhance the reconnection process. For many, transition can lead to self-renewal—to a reassessment of existing skills and the development of new skills that will enable

them to be competitive in a rapidly changing workplace. "In the early 1990s, one university president told incoming freshmen that as many as 85 percent of the jobs that will be available by 2010 haven't even been thought of yet! He also predicted that these students should expect to have 4 to 5 career—not job—changes during their working life" (Unger 1995, p. 44).

Develop New Skills and Competencies

Skill enhancement through continuing education and training can open new doors to workers in transition. In the new workplace, characterized by continuous improvement, international quality standards, self-management, teamwork, and high skill-high performance expectations, supervisory and quality control tasks are moving to the hands of all workers. As a result, the skills required for successful employment are growing in number and expanding in function. Some educators believe that "the fastest growing and economically most promising positions are technical jobs requiring training beyond high school but less than a four-year degree" (Feller 1996, p. 148).

Engage in Career Exploration

Career exploration and self-assessment are another area of focus for workers in transition, who may be young adults between the ages of 28 and 35, who are prompted to move from an existing job to learn if there is something more satisfying out there; midcareer adults, 40-55 years old, who are searching for work that they deem worthwhile; and early retirees (55 years and beyond) who want to build careers in new directions. The patterns established to acquire new skills and self-knowledge during the transition period can set the stage for lifelong learning.

Be Willing to Compromise

Successful transitions may also require the development of realistic job reward expectations and an attitude of compromise. Workers moving to smaller, midsized companies may find that they must accept reduced salaries, benefits, and job security, which may require a readjustment of financial goals and spending habits. Even if a new job provides the same salary, the benefits may be less than in the previously held job. "A Commerce Department Survey found that only 32 percent of 3.4 million men age 25 to 54 who changed full-time jobs from 1991 to 1993 had employer-sponsored health insurance in their new jobs, compared with 49 percent who had coverage under their old employers. And, among 1.8 million similar female job changers, the incidence of employer-sponsored coverage fell from 46 percent to 30 percent" (Koretz 1995, p. 38).

Seek Career Counseling

For those whose work history has been characterized by "job churning," career counseling may be necessary. Two reasons for successive job changes that have implications for school-to-work transition efforts are the lack of appropriate job matching and the failure of newly hired workers to allow time to become acclimated to the job. Educators can facilitate transitions by providing students work-related experience through internships, work experience programs, mentoring, and so forth. Coaching on the need to allow time to learn the ropes, become familiar with the company rules/regulations, and become socialized to the new situation is another way educators can help young workers make successful work transitions (Feller 1996).

Be Creative

Exploring alternative ways to deal with job dissatisfaction may reduce job hopping. Not all efforts to step up the career ladder require movement to a new organization. Sometimes career advancement can be achieved by developing new skills and a willingness to assume new responsibilities. Lateral shifts offer another way to achieve career mobility without leaving the organization. Employees can often broaden their knowledge and skills by shifting to a part of the organization that is targeted for expansion or restructuring with new technology.

"Downshifting" provides another alternative for workers who are dissatisfied with their jobs by enabling them to return to aspects of their jobs that are more enjoyable or present a personal challenge. For example, a school administrator may recognize that his/her greatest enjoyment and sense of accomplishment came from teaching and, subsequently, initiate a return to the classroom. Downward shifts may also make it possible for individuals to incorporate other priorities more regularly into their daily lives, such as further education, health needs, and family.

Alternative employment patterns offer another option for workers in or anticipating transition because they are dissatisfied with their current full-time status. Because part-time employment offers flexibility for the organization as well as the worker, nearly 75 percent of all employers in a survey conducted by Work/Family Directions indicated they now permit part-time employment compared to 50 percent in 1992 ("FYI" 1996). Flextime, another employment option, is also increasing in acceptance. In the same 1996 survey, "57 percent of the employers offer flextime today compared with only 48 percent in 1992" (ibid., p. 1). Job sharing and telecommuting, although still rather new, have the potential to become more widespread in future.

Career mobility is a trend that is likely to continue as workers assume more responsibility for their career development and advancement. The factors influencing mobility may change, but the ways of using it as a tool for capitalizing on the dynamics of the changing workplace demand continued skill development, self-reliance and resilience, and lifelong learning.

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